From uncomfortable to comfortable: the adaptive reuse of Australian gaols

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From Uncomfortable to Comfortable: The Adaptive Reuse of Australian Gaols

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From Uncomfortable to Comfortable: The Adaptive Reuse of Australian Gaols

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Abstract

Penal colonies form an important historic cornerstone in colonial Australia, and therefore are considered part of Australia's widely debated uncomfortable heritage. Over time, many incarceration facilities around Australia have become functionally obsolete and were decommissioned. In the last few decades, many of those decommissioned Australian gaols listed as heritage buildings have undergone adaptive reuse. They have been transformed from uncomfortable and shameful memories to community spaces or tourist attractions. Most of these gaols were adapted to museums that celebrate the dark history of the site, while in a few cases, preserved gaols were integrated with mixed-use and residential developments, reused as boutique hotels, event venues, theatres, or art schools. The aim in this paper is to critically discuss the underlying rationale for transforming heritage-listed Australian gaols, as representatives of 'uncomfortableness', to house contemporary functions for the public to use and embrace. How do such buildings that remind us of our shameful past find their place in contemporary society? Discussion of the literature relates to dark tourism both internationally and in Australia, such as 'time' as a strategy for forgetting, selective remembrance of a site's negative memories, economic viability of reusing dark heritage for tourism, and the rarity value of historic buildings. Issues behind the unusual adaptations of 'castles of shame' into places of contemporary democratic society are identified, discussed and supported by actual examples.

Keywords: Adaptive reuse, Dark tourism, Gaols, Uncomfortable heritage, Australia.

Source of 'Uncomfortableness', or not!

Literature describes pre-20th Century Australian gaols[i] as shrines of darkness and fear. Australia's historic gaols were brutal, unpleasant (Grant & Jewkes, 2015), fearful (Wilson, 2005), terrorising (Wilson, 2008), harsh and dark experiences for the inmates, a place of abject misery, and were no place for comfort or idleness. In their grounds exist burial sites for those notorious prisoners who were hanged during the gaols' life (Kingsley & Jones, 2012). At that time, large gaols were usually constructed kilometres away from cities, perched on hills as fearful beacons for the outlaws at large in the community. Based on the same philosophy of mediaeval fortresses 'neo-Gothic' architecture, gaols were designed to look like a castle (Wilson, 2008). So, instead of taking protective measures to keep invaders' out, gaols were

designed to keep inmates inside their perimeter walls. Gatehouses and fences with portcullis, battlements and loopholes were purposefully combined to act as a sign of warning.
Even family members and friends visiting inmates, as well as the surrounding communities near the gaols, associated the uncomfortable monolithic grimness of the gaols' facade with the inferred violence within (Wilson, 2005; Kingsley & Jones, 2012; Witcomb, 2012). Those who became to live in an operational gaol's close surroundings as cities expanded, spoke of their constant unease, dislike, and fear of the darkness inside (Wilson, 2008). Fearing escapes, surrounding residents reinforced their doors and windows with extra locks and security measures. Many of those nearby residents did not have a usual outdoor life, dreading any possible chances of an escapee forcing entry to their homes while they slept (Wilson, 2005). Regarding family members and close friends of a convict, they went through difficult experiences too. Besides having a socio-cultural 'stain' due to their relationship with a convict, they faced emotional breakdowns and stress (Wilson, 2005). Their visits to gaols were characterised by sad emotions and quick encounters; while feeling a glimpse of the inmates' uncomfortableness despite being innocent of any crime.

In the last few decades, most of the approximately 75 old gaols constructed before the 20th Century in Australia turned obsolete. Decommissioned gaols were either partially or entirely closed, demolished, or reused for different purposes, else left to fall into ruin and disrepair (**Figure 1**). Australia's heritage listed gaols still in good shape and condition[ii] were mainly transformed to museums (approximately one-third), except in a few cases.

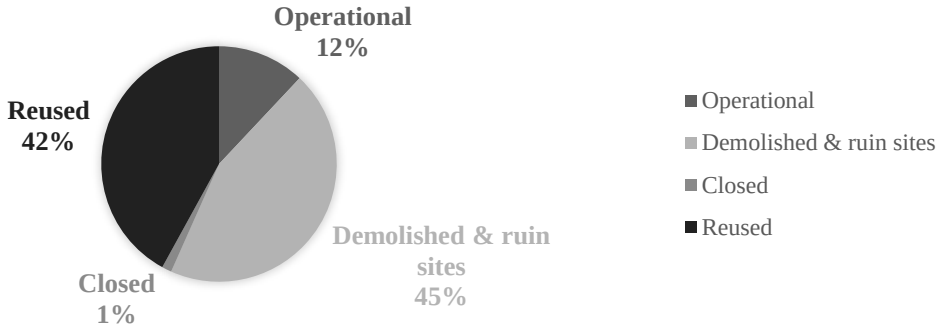

Figure 1. The current status of valuable gaols built before 1900 or those later but on the Heritage Register (data collected by the Authors).

Generally, there is a growing global interest in witnessing heritage gaols with uncomfortable history turned into places for commemoration and dark tourism (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Hartmann, 2014; Huang & Lee, 2018), including in Australia (Casella & Fennelly, 2016; Wilson, 2017). However, it is unexpected to see such dark, miserable and uncomfortable places converted to other functions that include end-users such as children, students, lecturers, and families. Indeed, few gaols were transformed into different functions other than a museum. Examples include a public theatre and culinary school - 'Sandhurst Gaol' (Parker & Kingsley, 2015), a school of art - 'Long Bay Correctional Centre' (National Arts School, 2018), and mixed-use development including hostel, commercial and residential facilities - 'H.M. Pentridge' (Ola Studio, 2018).

Methodological approach

Given all the uncomfortableness associated with Australian gaols, it is surprising that Australians are interested in reusing decommissioned gaols at all. Perceptions such as refusal, shame, and denial of the past are now less obvious. The understanding of the factors underlying this change of perception is not well understood. Further exploration would help stakeholders

embrace the opportunities for adaptive reuse, since they have economic and environmental attributes that add to the case for retention (Langston, 2011). The aim in this paper is therefore to unpack and critically discuss the underlying rationale and motivation for transforming heritage-listed Australian gaols that are representatives of 'uncomfortableness' into contemporary spaces for the public to 'comfortably' enjoy. Being a source of darkness and uncomfortableness, how can the public embrace the adaptation of old gaols into spaces of enjoyment? How do such buildings that remind us of our shameful past find a place in contemporary society as a source of attraction, entertainment and recreation? To what extent does a morbid fascination with darkness become a dominant driver for visiting old gaols? How did these buildings manage to gain public support and patronage?

Questioning the 'un-comfortability' of gaols

For a couple of decades, intensive literature, research and numerous publications have addressed the topic of dark (or uncomfortable) heritage, with few recent references to incarceration heritage in the thanatourism mapping (Wilson, 2011; Witcomb, 2012; Hartmann, 2014; Casella & Fennelly, 2016; Smith, 2017). Even fewer resources have discussed the adaptive reuse of historic gaols to accommodate non-touristic purposes. Most resources that cover the adaptive reuse of gaols for non-museum functions are online news, web pages of local community associations, and websites of architectural consultancies, except for some case-study research (Wilson, 2005, 2008, 2011) that explored non-touristic aspects for HM Pentridge Prison near Melbourne. Thus, this paper seeks motives, incentives or justifications for the adaptive reuse of some of Australia's decommissioned gaols to outweigh the uncomfortable memories and tragedies that these sites possess. The following factors to some extent have contributed to a gradual or partial acceptance of the past.

Darkness level: Although it seems difficult to acknowledge, decommissioned gaols might not be so dark after all. Hartmann (2014) illustrated the full spectrum of uncomfortable heritage levels, ranging from darkest to lightest, and outlined seven darkness suppliers: dark camps of genocide, dark conflict sites, dark shrines, dark resting places, dark dungeons, dark exhibitions, dark fun factories. On the darkest side of the diagram, he exemplifies sites of mass death and extreme human suffering such as those associated with the Holocaust in Europe. Gaols lie roughly in the light-medium part of the spectrum. According to Smith (2017) in a survey she had done on Old Melbourne Gaol's visitors, many described their visit to the site as entertainment. In other cases, gaols do not stand as examples of conservation or commemoration, but as commercial ventures, especially where they are amenable to public events, open markets, and other social celebrations. These sorts of activities are not even an option for the revival of darker tourism sites on the extreme left-hand side of the spectrum.

Collective memory: The dominant historical narrative throughout the latter half of the 20th Century claims that Australia's convict origins were a source of ambiguity (Casella & Fennelly, 2016). According to Wilson (2011), connections to incarcerated ancestors (including indigenous Australians) used to cause a highly unusual relationship with Australia's carceral past, and that individual Australians had reason to psychologically feel a specific notion of imprisonment as part of their sense of national identity, and thus feel uncomfortable with gaols. However, this stereotype narrative was continuously challenged, and the history of the Australia's ancestors is more publicly embraced since the early 1960s (Casella & Fennelly, 2016). For instance, transported convicts were not composed entirely of common criminals, professional thieves and prostitutes, but also included many 'social protestors', 'fairly robust', 'stroppy' people, 'poachers', anti-machinery workers and farmers, and Irish who were political prisoners (Keneally, 2010). Adding to the non-criminal population, free people from Britain,

Ireland and other parts of Europe joined the newly colonised lands within a few years. They were attracted to dreams of a better life or sentenced by their families for all sorts of reasons. Australia was a great place to send young men of the gentry and bourgeoisie who had gambling debts, had been cashiered, weren't particularly good academically, or who had impregnated the maid. According to Keneally (2010) and Wilson (2011), since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, the percentage of convicts to the overall population was reduced considerably. Hence the notion that all or even most of the current living population of Anglo-Australians necessarily descend from the originally transported convicts or have a larrikin national character is a fallacy (Wilson, 2011; Smith, 2017). Now, the early Australian penal history is sometimes referred to as a source of pride, not shame. This attitude enabled contemporary Australians not to feel any shame or disgrace when visiting a decommissioned gaol. In her study, Smith (2017) conducted 101 interviews to examine the memories and evidence of how visitors, of which 76 were local Australians, identify with the Old Melbourne Gaol. Tourists did not demonstrate any expectation of connection to values underlying the larrikin stereotype.

Social memory: In the last few decades of the operation of historic Victorian gaols, not all neighbours of the prison perceived them in a negative way. The study of Wilson (2008) on HM Pentridge Prison's neighbours reveals a clear distinction between those who disliked and feared the prison when it was operational and a significant minority who felt positive about it as a presence in the community. The psychological roots of such division were that almost all of the minority group acknowledged some form of personal link with the prison or the penal system, having been employed there or having had family members or acquaintances who worked there. Even further, in a study by Galford & Peek (2015), some families who had an ex-convict member tended to think of this gaol as a second home; given that one of their members was 'housed' there. This study even suggested that upgrading closed gaols to another form of 'housing' solution via adaptive reuse and leasing them as residential buildings is a logically sound idea. Others recounted childhood memories of prison-sponsored events such as Christmas festivities mounted within the gaol by inmates. While this might not be how the majority feel, those disposed to be positive about the institution in their midst tended to be those who, for one reason or another, identified to have somewhat positive memories and hence be open to the adaptive reuse of former gaol sites.

Rarity: Dark tourism is a growing trend of tourism worldwide. People increasingly organise sightseeing at locales of death, disaster and atrocity. Types of sites range from war sites, to battlefields, assassination and terrorist attack sites, Holocaust memorials, even natural disaster remnants. In most countries, a wide variety of sites would qualify for the 'dark tourism' label. However, the Australian variety of dark tourism is unusually limited (Wilson, 2008, 2011). No significant historical battles have taken place on Australian soil, no civil wars or internal conflicts have split the Australian commonalty, nor has our history been significantly shaped by assassinations of public figures. With a relatively small exception, former gaols dominate the scene of dark tourism in Australia. This rarity of other examples of dark tourism might explain the touristic pressures asserted on the few decommissioned gaols that remain.

Time: Gaols and their sites may provide clues to the remembrance of stigmatising association of the pre-existing use for long periods of time. Local communities containing families of previous inmates may be hesitant or unwilling to be advocates of site reuse due to shame and embarrassment (Galford & Peek, 2015). However, 'time dilutes associations' is a generally accepted statement in dark tourism, and more specifically gaol heritage literature. On one hand, 'long time' heals stigmatised associations and gets ultimately forgotten by the general public and replaced by acceptance (Joseph et al., 2013) or even romanticism (Witcomb, 2012). The

longer the time, the more families of past inmates become deceased or relocated, enabling future advocates for gaol reuse to have no direct connections to the history of the site but instead to its tangible fabric. This supports a fresh look at the building, hence increasing its potential for reuse (Galford & Peek, 2015), to the extent that ideas such as combining residential development with uncomfortable heritage preservation can be on the discussion table (Joseph et al., 2013). Alternatively, 'short times' might also lead to memory alienation for the sake of saving tangible heritage. Quick actions can result in sudden fear of disappearance of tangible heritage, leading to less conservative adaptive reuse proposals (i.e. far from memorial-like function or museums). In the case of HM Pentridge Prison, the Victorian State Government sold the gaol to private developers soon after decommissioning (Wilson, 2005). Heritage activists found themselves face to face with real-estate developers who were determined to have a worthy return on their investment. Negotiations had no room for only tourism, site memorialisation, or another sort of low-income transformation. The result is a mixed-use development with less regard to memory preservation (Wilson, 2005).

Proximity to CBD (real-estate value): The 18th and 19th Century gaols in Australia were constructed many kilometres away from city centres on often-generous land endowments. Over time, their surrounding green space was consumed by the sprawling boundaries of major cities (Porro & Fransson, 2018). This phenomenon placed decommissioned gaols under high pressure for real estate development (Bailey & Donatelli, 2002). Middle-class suburban and younger populations are the target groups to live in proximity to former gaol sites. A mix of heritage and contemporary design, new neighbourhoods, individual houses or other low density structures, and also student accommodation can provide a good return on investment with high rates of sale and little regard to any past stigma caused by site associations (Joseph et al., 2013). In the case of HM Pentridge Prison, right after buying the property from the government and in a direct response to market real estate forces, the developers wanted to wipe-out traces of darkness and uncomfortableness attached to the site by demolishing the gaol and building a prestige housing estate (Wilson, 2008). However, due to the involvement of the public, local community and heritage-activists, some sections of the former gaol were preserved and integrated into a whole site adaptation and reuse project. The campus is now re-planned to house residential buildings, along with commercial, cultural, educational and entertainment venues (Harris, 2018; Ola Studio, 2018). Middle-class suburbanites are now competing to live where one of the most notorious gaols ever built once sat, inside its previous walls, and where convicts and bushrangers are buried, with little regard to any associated uncomfortableness. Adding to the list of users, part of the residential complex in Pentridge, a hostel and a boutique hotel are being constructed. It is not the luxurious decoration of the hotel, convenient room service or its comfortableness that attract the new waves of millennial tourists and backpackers. Young tourists do not mind staying in tight spaces and share communal facilities such as bathrooms, especially for short durations. Less time is being spent in a hotel/hostel, and more time in the hustle and bustle of cities, hence diminishing the hotel's role more to minimal commodities for a few hours of sleep. Thus, for many, the proximity to CBD appear to overcome dark memories of the site.

Names: Developers seeking return on investment, usually change the original names of former gaols to tongue-in-cheek names. Such practice usually leads casual observers to confuse a recycled uncomfortable heritage building with the buildings and grounds of refurbished luxury homes. Even searching by names in Google Earth or Google Maps for locations of gaols that have been adaptively reused to non-museum functions lead to nothing, except in few very recent cases such as Pentridge. Keeping the old names in online search engines associated with transformed sites may have potentially negative connotations for residents and might

discourage potential purchasers (Joseph et al., 2013). For example, in the case of Bendigo Gaol, which was transformed recently to a theatre, its name was changed to 'Ulumbarra Theatre', losing part of its legacy. Giving nicknames to former gaols, or calling them by their nicknames is another form of supporting the branding and the marketing of reuse, reduces the trauma of their past (Joseph et al., 2013; Wilson, 2008). Nicknames are usually mentally associated with one of the prominent features of the gaols; such as its form (Arthur Head Gaol as 'The Round House'), colour of building material (Pentridge as 'Bluestone College'), or even named after the road which led to it that became a boggy quagmire after rain (Brisbane Prison as 'Boggo Road Gaol'). Less 'dark' names might mean more acceptance of adapting former gaols for reuse.

Site interpretation and presentation make it less dark: According to Witcomb (2012), the process of identifying heritage significance of Australian gaols is not neutral, but whimsical, and usually depends on the ever-changing values of society and the modern domination of economic gain and tourism opportunities. Local governments, site managers and developers try their utmost to render a site pleasant to its target audience by achieving more acceptance amongst future building users (Galford & Peek, 2015). The more exclusive and tailored the story gets, the more attention it gets. Therefore, site presentation activities deliberately avoid displaying incidents or actual events and try to stand in a passive position (Wilson, 2005; Witcomb, 2012), or at least try to focus on bizarre, catchy, romantic and striking histories to attract tourists (Galford & Peek, 2015). Smith (2017) in Old Melbourne Gaol, Wilson (2005) in HM Pentridge Prison, and Witcomb (2012) in Fremantle Gaol detail the ultimate gaol-museum products as 'less dark', and 'more interesting'. This ensures that the stories being told contains 'recreational' jokes while having exciting 'educational' resonance, in addition to being 'fun, light and entertaining', reducing any sense of 'uncomfortableness', 'darkness', 'tragic' or 'horror' associated with the site. For instance, site presentation in 'Fremantle Gaol' focuses on the more interesting colonial convict history of the site more than its recent histories (Witcomb, 2012). As an example of making the experience more educational sound to attract more audience, Wilson (2005) recognised cases which were only presenting ex-inmates who managed to transform their sentence into a positive non-criminal life while neglecting other ordinary, less spectacular and unremarkable prisoners. As a further example of intentional veiling of events, Wilson (2005) observed that tour guides of HM Pentridge Prison initiate no discussions of sexual violence or incidents, and they even deny such incidents when being asked by visitors. The selectivity of narratives is generally believed to increasingly make the gaol, as Wilson (2005) put it, a 'consumable tourism product'.

Urban and architectural edifices: Australian decommissioned heritage gaols, largely constructed in the 19th Century, have valuable visual qualities. The beautiful landscapes and the unique surrounding environments where many of these gaols lay on top of green hills make them attractive to visitors more than any connections to darkness, threat, mystery, thrill or fear (Witcomb, 2012; Casella & Fennelly, 2016). With time, the location of these gaols was in the middle of cities. Once decommissioned, the image of the castle on top of the hill undergoes a transformation of its significance as an edifice in the townscape and its aesthetic connotations. A transition at the level of cultural subtext also occurs, serving to nuance perceptions of the overall sites (Wilson, 2008). This transformation adds to its educational and cultural values for tourism as a romantic scene within a modern city (Wilson, 2011). Unless a visitor/user had a particular interest with a friend or family member imprisoned in gaol subject to their visit, they tend to admire the architectural design and embellishments of the gaols instead (Wilson, 2008). The same grand architectural features of these castle-style gaols that once stood as a warning are now visual signs of attraction and fascination and are used as dark tourism marketing

material (Muzaini, Teo, & Yeoh cited in Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Sensibilities of modern societies do not recognise the architecture of neo-Gothic gaols as threatening. Instead, a 'romantic' perception towards the well preserved neo-Gothic architecture of heritage gaols is claimed to overcome any, or at least most, of the darkness offered by the site (Wilson, 2008; Witcomb, 2012). Local and international tourists are willing to travel distances and pay an admission fee to look over the authentic fabric of former gaols that bear a resemblance to a medieval edifice. After surveying visitors of Old Melbourne Gaol (Smith, 2017), as well as other surveys nationwide (Wilson, 2008), tourists show a predominance of interest in the architecture over and above the imprisoned human element. After the Authors' site visit to Boggo Road Gaol and admiring its architectural style and the way the cell blocks are placed in the layout surrounding a central space in a classic Roman city piazza-like design, it seemed that being a prisoner there may not have been such a bad experience. Once emptied of prisoners and rendered as purely 'historical', the same embellishments that had most frowned city dwellers are now architecturally valuable 'classic' features to the relatively modern Australian environment (Smith, 2017; Wilson, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper explores the main drivers mentioned in the literature that aid the understanding of adaptive reuse opportunities of former Australian gaols, despite the 'uncomfortableness' that arises from its past. Not surprisingly, some justifications for reusing old gaols are discussed in terms of the economic pressures to maximise the use of buildings and preserve resources, or an interest in their past history that encourages tourism and local employment. However, some justifications mentioned in the surveyed literature that detract end-users and lead them away from this form of uncomfortable heritage, can in many instances encourage the adaptive reuse of old gaols in a 'double entendre' effect. Some factors such as visual aspects, collective memory and historical narratives can be understood in terms of affecting the attitudes of building users in two ways: usually a positive (attracting) one and a negative (detracting) one. In these factors, emotions of horror, fear, and sadness can be overstressed, highlighted and emphasised, while in other cases the same emotions are inverted, eliminated, disguised and beautified. Each side-way of dealing with these parameters can lead to different results that are totally or partially contrasting. It can be concluded that the material presented to tourists, visitors, and end-users of old gaols is not necessarily of an extreme dark nature; on the contrary, it might be softened and normalised to suit a more varied range of tastes and might also be more selective and well presented to attract a wider target audience. Careful controlling of these curatorial parameters is the way to shape and deal with uncomfortable heritage, and how we present it for future generations.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by a Bond University Postgraduate Research Award.

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[i] Referring to gaols/dʒeɪl (US: jails), the term can include remand centres, prisons, prison farms, prison factories, prison camps, pre-release centres, assessment prisons, penal establishments, training centres, correctional centres, those contained women or men inmates, or both. The definition of 'gaol' in this paper does not include youth centres, juvenile, youth training centres, or boy's homes.

[ii] It is important to highlight that unlike reconstructing ruins; the basic notion of adaptive reuse implies that buildings can house users with minimal interventions. Thus, this research focuses on reused or closed gaols, those gaols which still stand as buildings with walls, flooring and roof(s) - i.e. not in a state of ruins, even if accessible by tourists.